

8 Student perspectives on intercultural learning from an online teacher education partnership

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Abstract

This study reports on intercultural learning during telecollaboration from the perspective of student participants in a five-country online teacher education partnership. The student perspectives reported here were drawn from one intact class in the partnership, five students who completed this partnership as part of a sociolinguistics course in a secondary school English teacher education program in Sweden. Offline, the telecollaboration served as a discussion point for course themes and as data for a study on a sociolinguistic topic carried out by each student. Findings revealed intercultural learning occurred in three situations: as a result of in-class conflict during discussion of the telecollaboration, through analysis of interactional styles found in the online discussion posts for the sociolinguistics study, and through online discussion with peers in other countries regarding educational practices.

Keywords: teacher education, sociolinguistics, telecollaboration, intercultural learning.

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1. Introduction

Telecollaboration has an established history in university foreign language education extending over at least 20 years (O'Dowd, 2016). As is the case with many established language education practices, the effectiveness of telecollaboration to support language and intercultural learning has been the object of both investigation and scrutiny. A recent critique by Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) questions the degree to which the online interactions and tasks used in well-cited studies of telecollaboration truly supported intercultural learning. Specifically, they identify limitations in the online tasks which they defined as cultural tasks, “tasks that focused on factual information” and not intercultural tasks, which “involved learners moving between cultures and reflecting on their own cultural positioning” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 117). As a result, they argue, intercultural learning did not occur automatically out of the online engagement.

O'Dowd (2016), however, points to a growing consensus in the telecollaboration literature which does not assume that intercultural learning occurs as a direct outcome of online interaction. One example can be found in Belz's (2007) discussion of in-class or reflective activities which allow learners to explore what Agar (1994) labels rich points, or points of contact between culturally situated ways of thinking which may result in misunderstanding or tension, that occurred during or around the online interaction.

Telecollaboration is more than a tool for language learning and also represents a means of bringing together distantly located future professionals whose 21st century job demands may benefit from discussion and problem-solving with experts and peers in other contexts. Such was the motivation behind the teacher education partnership, *Innovations in Foreign Language Education*, which brought together language teacher education students in five countries (Canada, Israel, Spain, South Korea and Sweden). This partnership was organized into five modules, each tied to a technology-enhanced theme within language teaching (i.e. flipped classroom, telecollaboration, fandom tasks, social presence online, multimedia materials) and modeled upon the

Sharing Perspectives (2015) model of exchange. Each module incorporated a video lecture, related readings and questions organized and moderated by a different expert, which were viewed, read and discussed by participants in five different multicultural groups. While the emphasis of a such a partnership was not on intercultural learning, the international and multicultural nature of the groupings and the participants potentially provided opportunities for *Agar's* (1994) rich points to occur around the use of technology in the participants' educational contexts.

Accordingly, this study explores if and when intercultural learning occurred for members of one of the partner classes in this online teacher education partnership.

2. Methodology

The student perspectives from this partnership were drawn from the partner class in Sweden and included all five students, four men and one woman, enrolled in the course. All were in their fifth and final year of a teacher education program preparing them to become secondary school English teachers. The telecollaboration itself was embedded in a sociolinguistics course, with each online module serving as a discussion point for course themes (i.e. language socialization, language ideologies, multimodal literacy, language and ethnicity, gender identities) and as data for a study on a sociolinguistic topic that each student was required to complete (see *Sauro, 2016*).

Student perspectives were elicited through a semi-structured interview held at the end of the course using a romantic approach “in which the interviewer strives to develop rapport with the interviewees in an effort to generate authentic, in-depth dialog that focuses on participants' meanings” (*Roulston, 2011*, p. 78). This was augmented by tape analysis (*Dörnyei, 2007*) of audio recordings of the five one hour in-class discussions of each telecollaboration module, as well as analysis of the students' discussion board posts and the students' completed sociolinguistic studies.

3. Results and discussion

Participants identified three situations where intercultural learning occurred: conflicts that arose during in-class discussion of the telecollaboration, analysis of discussion board posts for the sociolinguistics study, and during the online interaction. Each is illustrated in a vignette below.

3.1. Conflict during in-class discussion

Students identified rich points that resulted in conflict during weekly in-class discussion of the telecollaboration. One in particular concerned a disagreement over the interpretation of an Israel-based U.S. student's post regarding the need to carefully select books of fiction for her future students that would not run afoul of parental disapproval. In class, a conflict arose between Sam, who was dismayed by what he read as unprofessional acquiescence to parental interference, and Andy, who drew upon a gap year spent in the United States to interpret the post as an ironic critique of U.S. politics. Sam, however, drew upon his extensive experience in international online chat communities like Reddit, where irony and sarcasm are indexed through emoticons or other textual markers (e.g. /s to denote sarcasm) to reject Andy's interpretation.

Although neither persuaded the other to change their stance, the disagreement led Sam to observe that “even though we're both Swedes, me and Andy think very different from each other. Culture is as much group as it is individual. You can belong to a lot of different cultures and even though you belong to the same, the others you belong to will color your views so much that it's still not translated perfectly between each other”.

3.2. The sociolinguistic study

Students also pointed to analysis of the discussion board postings for their sociolinguistics studies as another site of intercultural learning. Regina, who researched addressivity differences among the members of her online discussion

group found that “when we did the research on the Schoology posts [the online platform], I got very aware of how I wrote my own posts”.

In particular, a topic raised in the first class meeting regarding Swedish tendency to avoid conflict was revisited in Regina’s analysis. She observed how her conflict avoidance strategies in online discussion limited the type of answers she was able to elicit from her peers, and subsequently her level of engagement in the telecollaboration compared to some of her peers: “I realize that I maybe was a bit scared of conflict and I should have just asked more questions or been a bit more pushed towards having an answer”.

3.3. Online interaction

Finally, participants identified the online interaction during the telecollaboration as another source of intercultural learning, specifically discussions of educational practices. For Andy, this led to an awareness that what he had previously assumed to be a uniquely Swedish crisis in education was actually a common issue: “There seems to be this shared experience of public educators working in slightly underfunded schools and wanting to do all this stuff, but there just isn’t money... And for a long time, I genuinely thought that was just something Swedish”.

4. Conclusion

From the perspectives of students in this online teacher education partnership, intercultural learning, in other words, movement between different cultural viewpoints and reflection upon their own culture, occurred in three different situations. The first was as a result of conflict that arose during in-class discussion of the discussion board postings. The second was as a result of analyzing their own and others’ interactional strategies in the discussion posts for their sociolinguistic studies. The third was during the online interaction itself and specifically during discussion of educational practices. Taken together, these

reflect O’Dowd’s (2016) argument that such learning occurs not necessarily as a direct result of online discussion but rather out of scaffolded offline discussion or structured reflection activities.

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